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SUBJECT: IRI Explores Possibilities in Vietnam

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11. (U) Summary: While the conversations were mainly introductory and exploratory, the unprecedented level of interaction by Government of Vietnam (GVN) offices during the International Republican Institute's (IRI's) recent visit was a positive sign the GVN may be more willing to meet with NGOs and USG organizations with a good governance agenda. IRI Representative Johanna Kao's inquiring approach, which focused on learning more about ongoing GVN grassroots democracy and women's empowerment efforts, was also well-received. In Hanoi, Ms. Kao was able to hold all meetings that were requested and she was impressed by the level of engagement of her interlocutors. Meetings in Ho Chi Minh City also went relatively smoothly, except for reports from several lawyers who said they were discouraged by security officials from meeting with IRI. Overall, Ms. Kao said she came away with a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities for NGOs in Vietnam and would be sharing her assessment regarding potential opportunities for IRI in the near future. End summary.

12. (U) Ms. Johanna Kao, the Indonesia Country Director from the International Republican Institute (IRI), visited Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, January 23-30, to gain a better understanding of political reform, women's empowerment and grassroots democracy efforts the GVN is undertaking and to explore potential opportunities for IRI to offer assistance with these efforts. While in Hanoi, Ms. Kao met with USAID officers, various GVN offices, the Vietnam Women's Union and several NGOs. In HCMC, Ms. Kao met with two City Council members, representatives from the Ho Chi Minh City Bar Association and several GVN offices with responsibilities for women's issues and NGO's.

#### Building Capacity for Women Leaders

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13. (U) Ms. Duong Thi Xuan and Ms. Pham Hoi Giang, representatives of Vietnam Women's Union (VWU), a mass organization with responsibility for all women's issues, gave a thorough explanation of their role in Vietnamese society, including their activities in maintaining the VWU museum, running a publishing house for in-house publications, managing a microcredit program for female entrepreneurs, conducting vocational training for women, and addressing relatively new social issues like combating HIV/AIDS and trafficking in persons. Citing their major challenge as the need for capacity building at all levels, particularly for provincial and commune-level staff, Ms. Giang noted the VWU is endeavoring to train women leaders and encourage women's participation in advocacy activities. Ms. Kao shared details regarding an IRI program focused on women's political participation in Indonesia, which drew much interest and many questions from the Women's Union representatives.

14. (U) The HCMC Fatherland Front (the pro-Communist Party and GVN

umbrella group that oversees all mass governmental and non-governmental organizations in Vietnam) told Kao they are actively pursuing the GVN's national target of 30 percent participation by women in the government, noting that the People's Council Chair and Vice Chair of the People's Committee, two of the most powerful positions in HCMC's government, are held by women. Together with the HCMC Women's Union, the Fatherland Front selects and prepares strong female candidates for public office and believes they have achieved about 40 percent representation by women in HCMC's government thus far. Fatherland Front Vice Chairwoman Dr. Luong Bach Van noted while HCMC has been a leader in promoting women's participation, traditional attitudes and lack of capacity have made work in the provinces more challenging. Kao said IRI has come across similar issues with its program in rural China and would welcome the opportunity to share more of their experiences with the GVN.

#### Positive Feedback from Former IRI Intern

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15. (U) At the National Assembly, Ms. Kao met with one of the Vice Chairmen of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Mr. Ngo Duc Manh. Vice Chairman Manh was very familiar with IRI, having interned with IRI in Washington in 1996 during his two years as a Fulbright Scholar and Georgetown Law School. Vice Chairman Manh expressed his interest in having IRI work with the National Assembly, noting that "it's time to renew this relationship." He pointed out that many National Assembly members are interested in the U.S. political system and learning more about the relationship between the executive and legislative branches of government, even suggesting these might be areas where IRI could assist with workshops and visits by U.S. experts. Manh said as the National Assembly becomes a more independent and representative body, lobbying is increasingly becoming a topic of interest among its members. Manh was positive about the many opportunities for cooperation between IRI and the National Assembly.

#### Tale of Two Councilmen

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16. (U) Ms. Kao also had the opportunity to meet with two representatives from the Ho Chi Minh City People's Council. The Council, a body of 95 elected deputies who in turn choose the thirteen representative members of the People's Committee, are ostensibly the ones who bring constituent issues to the Committee's attention. Self-nominated two-term Councilman Dang Van Khoa described himself as an "ordinary guy representing ordinary people," and emphasized his role as the public's spokesman on key issues like the city's infrastructure, education, environment and social welfare programs. Khoa said he was one of the few on the Council with a reputation for being outspoken, noting that many Council members were "dozers-off" or too busy with their other occupations to attend sessions regularly. In contrast, Khoa's long and impassioned speeches before the Council have earned him the nickname of "the monologuer." HCMC University of Social Sciences Rector and City Councilman Vo Van Sen also spoke of the Council's important role in "checking" the People's Committee, noting that the Committee had to submit detailed reports of expenditures to the Council for their review and hold off on passing measures if the Council requested more information about them. [Note: It was unclear from these conversations how much actual autonomy the People's Council truly has, despite the elected status of its members. All candidates are vetted closely by the Fatherland Front and the majority of the Council are Party members. Though both Council members spoke positively of grassroots democratic reform, they did not offer much in the way of concrete details. End note.]

#### GVN-NGO Coordination

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17. (U) In Hanoi, Ms. Kao also had the opportunity to visit the People's Aid Coordinating Committee (PACCOM), the lead government agency for registration of NGOs doing business in Vietnam, to learn about the requirements necessary for NGO's to function at various levels within Vietnam, and had several frank discussions with U.S.-based NGOs operating in Vietnam about the challenges of beginning work here. The process is long and not necessarily

transparent, and Ms. Kao gained a realistic perspective on what IRI can expect, should the organization wish to begin conducting programs in Vietnam. In HCMC, Ms. Kao also met with International NGO umbrella group the HCMC Union of Friendship Organizations (HUFO), who work closely with PACCOC to facilitate the work of NGOs in HCMC and the southern provinces. They were enthusiastic about Ms. Kao's description of an e-government program in Indonesia that helped local officials communicate more efficiently with their communities using Internet and SMS text technology. The project was so successful that the province was able to mobilize a highly effective rapid relief effort during a major earthquake last year. HUFO President Le Hung Quoc said such a program might work very well in some of Vietnam's rural provinces.

18. (U) In meetings with local women's issues NGOs in Hanoi, Ms. Kao was briefed on their activities and discussed ways in which IRI's goals and methods might be effective in partnership with such organizations. She was impressed by the amount of activity occurring at the grassroots level, with a great deal of potential for enhancing the role of Vietnamese women in the political process.

Ms. Kao ended her stay in Hanoi with calls on the National Committee for the Advancement of Women and the Department of International Organizations at Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Both organizations were open and frank with Ms. Kao about their roles and activities, and welcomed Ms. Kao's desire to meet with them on future visits.

#### Legal Eagles Want More Exchanges

19. (SBU) Though four lawyers from the HCMC Bar Association were invited to meet with Ms. Kao in HCMC, only two, Mr. Dang Dung and Mr. Le Cong Dinh, came to the meeting. Both said all four were called by the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) prior to the meeting and encouraged not to meet with IRI. Dung and Dinh also believe that newly-confirmed HCMC Law School Rector Madame Quy likely declined IRI's meeting request due to pressure from authorities. [Note: Post believes it is more likely she bowed out due to political sensitivities related to her recent battle to win the top spot at the HCMC Law School. As acting rector, she met with IRI several times previously. End note.] Both lawyers believe IRI could play a positive role in helping to promoting legal reform by supporting educational and professional exchanges between Vietnamese and American lawyers. Ms. Kao said she was hoping to assist in efforts to link up the HCMC Law School with U.S. universities that have continuing education or mid-level professional programs in support of this goal, but welcomed more ideas.

110. (U) Comment: Overall, Ms. Kao indicated that her meetings in Vietnam were very productive, a marked contrast with unsuccessful past efforts by IRI and all the more remarkable given IRI's stated goal of democracy promotion. Ms. Kao was able to meet with a wide variety of interlocutors and discuss possible programs, primarily in

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the areas of grassroots democracy and women's participation in the political process. Both GVN and NGO representatives engaged Ms. Kao in discussion, expressed a desire for more information, and looked forward to building a relationship with IRI. This initial visit was exploratory in nature; the true test will come if/when IRI decides to attempt a program, either solo or in partnership with a local organization.

111. (SBU) The message received by Ms. Kao from those NGOs already operating in Vietnam was that it is important to spend a great deal of time building relationships here in the initial stages. Then begin with something small and seemingly insignificant to gain the trust of GVN interlocutors, before attempting to establish a full program. While PACCOC plays an important role in permitting NGO operations, NGOs on the ground advised that applications to PACCOC should be a long way down the road, and indeed could come after activities have commenced. The difficulties and frustrations HCMC lawyers outlined also demonstrated that not all GVN entities are on board with having IRI in Vietnam. Overall, post believes Ms. Kao gained an accurate picture of both the challenges and opportunities for NGOs wishing to enter Vietnam, particularly those engaged in the work of promoting good governance and citizen's political

participation.

¶12. (U) This cable was jointly drafted with Consulate General Ho Chi Minh City.